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FIGHTING FIRE WITH FIRE:
Policemen try to clear a burning barricade on the streets of Kathmandu on Tuesday. The government was forced to roll back an unpopular price increase.

ANUP PRAKASH

Getting there

We have to get to 10 April as there won't be a fourth chance

ANALYSIS by **KANAK MANI DIXIT**

Those who say with cynical certitude that elections cannot happen on 10 April do not know what they are talking about. They are the kind who would very much wish that their armchair prediction comes true, for whatever reason.

The fact is, there are too many variables in Nepali politics (new challenges, potential conflagrations, but also possible turnkey solutions) for anyone to be so sure that the

polls cannot not happen. The public, for its part, desires the constituent assembly elections desperately. But wanting them is not enough. The political parties, the government such as it is, and the madhesi leadership must work to make them happen.

We can get there if the political players work intensively over the next 10 days or so. Then they must begin to seriously discuss election observation, voter education regarding the mixed system, the election code of conduct, and ensuring security

during polling.

And it will be a relief to actually get to the point where we can be discussing how to prevent 'booth-capturing' by first-time parties, and first-time losers going on rampage. This river is full of boulders and rapids, but we have to get to the other side.

Just because the elections have been deferred twice, it doesn't mean they have to be deferred again. New demands are piling up on top of old, unfulfilled demands, but that doesn't mean elections can't happen in April.

To begin with, one needs to analyse why the first two attempts fell apart. Polls had to be put off in June for logistical reasons:

politicians were busy putting into place the code of conduct, the comprehensive peace agreement, the interim constitution, interim parliament and interim government. An insurgency can't be transformed overnight and the most the politicians can be blamed for is being optimistic about the scheduling.

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Published by Himalmedia Pvt Ltd, Editor: Kunda Dixit
Design: Kiran Maharjan
Director Sales and Marketing: Sunaina Shah marketing(at)himalmedia.com
Circulation Manager: Samir Maharjan sales(at)himalmedia.com
Subscription: subscription(at)himalmedia.com,5542525/535

Hatiban, Godavari Road, Lalitpur
GPO Box 7251, Kathmandu 5250333/845, Fax: 5251013
Printed at Jagadamba Press, Hatiban: 5250017-19



Another window

The government has bought itself a little more time to respond on the madhes

OIL SLICK

The parastatal Nepal Oil Corporation is a parasite. But even by its dismal management standards, the decision this week to raise prices was daft.

The tyre-burning spree by acolytes of the Maoist parties in government also demonstrated exactly what is wrong with this country. But one can understand the fury of consumers. The street protests may have been orchestrated, but they showed the widespread anger felt towards the state, not just for the price hike but also its general incompetence and apathy to the needs of the people in the nearly two years it has been in power.

The timing of the price rise was all wrong, coming just as hopes for timely constituent assembly elections had been rekindled. It was like handing a reason on a platter to those who wanted any excuse to abort the elections yet again.

The intention behind the sudden price rise has to be questioned for operational reasons as well. Citing mounting losses, NOC had raised petrol prices just a week ago. Other than token opposition from some consumer groups, people at large had accepted that decision with considerable understanding and forbearance. When crude prices go up in international markets, there is no way to escape the repercussions in countries that depend on imported fuel.

The argument that NOC can't afford to pay India for the refined petroleum products doesn't make sense because the government could have easily reduced the tax and maintained prices. It wastes our taxes anyway.

But even more reprehensible than NOC's decision was the threat by the transportation cartels to raise fares by 25 percent. Diesel prices went up by less than that, and they are a small component of the operating costs of bus and truck companies. How could such a hefty increase be justified?

The price volatility in the international petroleum markets will probably continue, but this shouldn't translate into volatility in Nepal's politics. There must be a strategy to stabilise prices. Not that anyone is going to read this and take any action, but here are some ideas:

- Set aside a fund from fuel sales to absorb future price shocks
- Reduce dependence on imported oil by providing tax rebates for electric vehicles
- Parties should tell their student unions they can't burn tyres and bring the country to a halt every time they don't like something

†
The other thing to do is to abolish the corrupt parasitic monopoly called NOC and open up petroleum imports to the private sector. Our gas stations are the most squalid in South Asia and the fuel they sell is the most expensive and adulterated.

It is time to clean this up once and for all. And if this week's street riots had one message for our rulers, it was that people are fed up not only with the corruption and mismanagement of NOC, but with its utter lack of accountability.

First the good news. The government appeared to show relatively greater interest in kicking off talks this week with madhesi groups who responded by pushing the 'decisive' phase of their movement by a fortnight. This gave all sides some more time to evolve creative political responses.



TARAI EYE
Prashant Jha

Bad news: this isn't a breakthrough. The players are not looking for a solution, but are safeguarding immediate interests. And the two do not necessarily converge beyond a point.

The seven parties still don't have a plan and responses are characterised by incoherence. NC leaders are in a tussle to carve out space. Sushil Koirala said that if he only knew how to get in touch with Goit and Jwala Singh, he would talk. Is that a joke? The president of the country's largest party can't get hold of two Indian mobile numbers? Maybe he should ask his madhesi activists,

many of whom are also with armed groups.

Ram Chandra Poudel suddenly wants to act as peacemaker because he saw the ground slipping beneath his feet with Sujata Koirala establishing separate contact with some madhesi groups through an aide. Encouraged by daddy, Sujata hopes to be credited with a political victory if the armed groups come just for one round of talks.

It is not going to be that simple, though. The credentials of the intermediary are dubious. And no one trusts Sujata after she ruined Upendra Yadav by encouraging him to go for a second phase of the movement so she could get at arch-foe, Home Minister Krishna Prasad Sitaula.

Then there are differences within the armed groups, particularly in Jwala Singh's outfit. One section is arguing for talks as a way to win legitimacy, especially at a time when local authorities in Bihar are stepping up the pressure. Jwala himself is understood to be saying that this is the time for organisation-building and agitation. He feels that a state which can't even raise petroleum prices is hollow and weak, and can be forced to bend.

Madhesi moderate groups decided on a more gradual movement out of both a sense of weakness and the need to warm up. They know they are now getting into dangerous territory. Madhesi groups do not want chaos, all they are looking for is a respectable face-saver which allows them to claim victory and helps secure electoral positions. Once a movement begins, all it will take is the killing of one person in police firing to make things emotive and radicalise demands.

Anyone who talks will be seen

as having sold out. The government's failure to implement the Upendra Yadav deal scares madhesi groups about going into negotiations. This is why Mahant Thakur asked for a clarification on the government's attitude regarding his demands as the first step to creating an environment for talks. Madhesi politicians do not see any point in talking to Poudel, whose ability to deliver has only diminished with Sujata's ascendance. Finally, the reason Poudel-Thakur talks might not happen is because no madhesi group will dare to come alone to the talks table. Successful negotiations have to be based on consultations with all three players.

India has been playing an important behind the scenes role. It told the government to act soon, and not expect Delhi to sort out the mess if things get dirty. Lainchaur also told Mahant Thakur to override objections within his party, especially from Hridayesh Tripathi, to ally with other madhesi groups. At the same time, it is leaning on madhesis not to escalate demands. Delhi still wants polls, but also wants to maintain and increase its influence across the madhesi political spectrum.

Irreconcilable as the two aims may seem, it also gives reason to believe that India will use its influence to push for a compromise.

All this adds up to a complex situation, which requires sensitivity from Kathmandu's political establishment and civil society. Some editorials in the capital have called for deployment of the army to quell tarai troubles. Do that, and madhesi extremists will be thrilled. After that, not even Pashupatinath can save this country from the rise of an armed separatist movement. ●



LETTERS

MADHES

Prashant Jha is again trying to justify what the tarai outfits are trying to do (Just do it, Tarai Eye, #383). It is now crystal clear that the madhes uprising was staged by vested interests, resulting in thousands of Biharis getting Nepali citizenship, not madhesis. The tarai politicians know that the government is weak to any attack, especially from ethnic communities, so they are trying to extract as many concessions as possible. Although there was injustice, at no point was it to such an extent that they were forced to seek a separate state. Knowing the geography and ethnic mix of Nepal, it was absurd for Girija to think that Nepal would be a Federal Democratic Republic. How can you justify a madhes state within Nepal, spreading from the east to the west of the country? How can you provide separate states to Limbus, Rais, Sherpas, Tamangs, Magars, Gurungs, Tharus, Dhimals, etc where

they have no majority? Do these states mean a handful of districts not bordering on each other? The whole concept of a federal structure is unjustifiable, not viable and should not have been promoted. Now you can see people like Prashant Jha trying to justify things that are not right for the country.

Abhi Karki, Pune

- Re Madhes checklist (Editorial, #383), the problem is that Kathmandu has been making decisions without considering the views, needs and demands of others. Why was the situation allowed to reach this boiling point? Because decisions in Kathmandu are taken by people who were supposed to look after their own constituencies but never even tried. Talking about Hridayesh, Thakur and Yadav from the madhes, they were just mouthpieces for Kathmandu. They are very proud that they belong to Kathmandu. That is why they all live in Kathmandu. It is not only politicians. Look at civil society. So when

you say: 'Wake up, Kathmandu,' I hope you are really targeting those from outside Kathmandu.

Kishor Kamal, email

FAMILY

Re: 'Family business' (State of the state, #383), I have three words to describe the nomination of Sujata as minister without portfolio: i epitome of nepotism.

Chanda Thapa, email

ANIMATION

It was great to read about Nepali animation scene in 'Into another dimension' (#383). With India hogging the IT market and already developing animation for big companies in Hollywood, Nepal can't get left behind. We need more studios like Firefly and Incessant Rain to compete with our South Asian counterparts. And looking at the quality of Firefly's animation, we can't be too far behind India.

S Basnet, Kathmandu

REVIEW

A fantastic review of *Kagbeni* by Kunda

Dixit (Coming of age with *Kagbeni*, #382). *Kagbeni* definitely will be marked as a trend-setting Nepali film. Another aspect of this film would be that it will also promote tourism by attracting people with its marvellous cinematography. However, I've also found that most teenagers are attracted to the film only because of the rumoured love scene.

Samyam Waglé, Kathmandu.

- I have never read a movie review as bad as 'Double billing' (Critical cinema, #382). Throwing in loads of adjectives doesn't make a film review. Although let me say it is always good to read young writers in NT.

Sarahana Rai, email

THE ASS

I look forward to reading the Ass every Friday. Do you guys sit down and write it together? Who is the Ass? Curious minds want to know.

Prerana Sthapit, email



SAM KANG LI

Dark forces rising

With the Maoists now on board, it looks like someone else is causing trouble

Tuesday 22 January could prove to be a defining date in our collective memory. In turbulent periods of history, uncertainty is the only certainty. Days break with a strange mixture of hope, despair and foreboding in the air. Dusk brings a resigned sense of relief. But even in the confusion of constant change, some days are more tumultuous than others.



STATE OF THE STATE
C K Lal

From early morning, rumours about the prime minister's health began spreading through Kathmandu. Meticulously planned and carefully orchestrated tyre burning shut down the city's thoroughfares, ostensibly in protest at the previous evening's petroleum price rise. A madhesi officer at the Agricultural Development Bank in Rajbiraj was shot dead for refusing to hand over Rs 3 million. In Khotang, for the first time since the civil war ended, three police posts were overrun and their arms looted by a mysterious crowd, which later clarified its intent to prevent the constituent assembly elections at any cost.

For hope, we had to look abroad. In New York, UNMIN was denied an expansion of its role, reportedly at the insistence of the Chinese. In New Delhi, the British and Indian prime ministers welcomed the announcement of a date for Nepal's constituent assembly elections. Together they urged all parties "to cooperate and maintain the declared date to ensure a free and fair process, open to all without intimidation." For good measure,

they added a pious sermon: "It is for the people of Nepal to decide their own future." Phew! What a relief! At least in their eyes, we are masters of our own destiny.

This destiny, however, seems to be slowly slipping from our grasp. Powerful forces opposed to the sovereignty of the people have begun to act in silent concert to subvert all efforts to hold the elections. They have been dormant until now because they didn't believe the Seven Party Alliance was serious about the polls. With Maoists and mainstreamers at each other's throats, there was no need for a third party to meddle. But several simultaneous developments have changed the status quo.

For the first time since their entry into mainstream politics, the Maoists have officially decided to enter the electoral fray. Pushpa Kamal Dahal directed his cadres to return property to its rightful owners and consented silently when home minister Krishna Prasad Sitaula promised to mobilise local administrations to help restore land to its titleholders. Despite apprehension over the poll result, the Maoists appear to be preparing to face the electorate.

The Nepali Congress was never too keen on the elections. Sujata Koirala took all the flak for saying what almost every NC central committee member was thinking: reactivate the 1990 constitution to pave the way for direct elections to a new parliament. However, this strategy has failed to find any takers outside the usual suspects: Khum Bahadur Khadka, Bijay Gachhedar, Govind Raj Joshi, Chiranjibi Wagle and the like. All other NC stalwarts have now realised that they can do very little to avoid facing the people.

The constituent assembly election will also be the death of the royalists. There is no way the interim parliament will accept any role for the king. But, contrary to widespread suspicion, the silence of Gyanendra can also be construed as his acquiescence to the necessity and importance of a constituent assembly.

More than anything else, it's the enthusiastic participation of people in the SPA's mass meetings in Biratnagar and Bhairahawa that has alarmed those opposed to the polls. The SPA leadership needs to extend these programs to the districts. Constituent assembly elections are not about making a government or choosing a president. They are about charting the future course of Nepal. That requires nothing less than the complete unity of purpose among the constituents of SPA government assigned to the task of conducting elections. ●

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Just because the elections have been deferred twice, it doesn't mean they have to be deferred another time

from p.1

As far as November is concerned, even though the key janajati and madhes groups had signed on, the Maoists got cold feet. But then the rebel radicals couldn't show any *chamatkar* and so now we would have to believe that the party is ready to take the plunge. In the interim, the madhes has come onto the boil, with several new political organisations intent on creating a political base in fast-forward.

Meanwhile, the parliamentary parties are in election mode, with the leaders back on the campaign trail they have not walked for nine long years. True, there are factions within the Nepali Congress and CPN (Maoist) which do not want polls, but their potential for damage is limited if the momentum picks up. The same holds true for those who would wish for a rightward slide of the polity.

But the six-plus-one parties have not focused enough on the madhes issue, which has to be



KIAN PANDAY

resolved to get the country to the ballot box. In fact, the first joint mass rally in Kathmandu on 14 January had the flavour of a pahadiya challenge to the

madhesi—just the wrong message at this time, when symbolism has become so important. (The subsequent rallies in Biratnagar and Bhairahwa corrected the

flavour somewhat.)

Madhesi demands can be tackled with relative ease, but for that you first have to have a functioning government. Girija Prasad Koirala's distanced leadership has become more remote due to illness, and senior kangresis are up in arms about the elevation of the First Daughter to ministerdom and chief troubleshooter. Meanwhile, the formal position of peace-negotiator is with Peace Minister Ram Chandra Poudel, who seems intent on going it alone with overstatement and loud diplomacy.

Amidst all this, the new entities in the tarai are trying to build a political base in a region electrified by last winter's Madhes Movement. Madhesi leaders face challenges on several fronts: the widespread populism that has gripped large parts of the tarai, a brutal militancy that demands obeisance, and a Kathmandu which seems incapable of extending even simple courtesies. Amidst these challenges, the politicians of tarai-madhes have maintained a sense of proportion and responsibility.

The hill-centric national leadership needs to pay attention to demands coming from the working alliance of Upendra Yadav, Rajendra

Mahato and Mahanta Thakur. A state establishment that has been magnanimous with the Maoists could well attend to madhesi grievances.

The tripartite madhes leadership wants a commitment to autonomy (*swayattata*, not limited to the tarai people), a term which would be defined for the Nepali context by the sovereign, elected constituent assembly. In fact, autonomy is already mentioned in the government's agreement with the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum of last August. It would be the task of the proposed state-restructuring commission to go deeper into the matter.

The plains leaders also seek electoral reforms or, alternatively, flexible interpretation of existing regulations to allow their fledgling parties to choose more madhesi candidates under the 'proportional' list of the mixed system. Meanwhile, the grating issue of under-representation in the state machinery must be addressed with a promise of fast-track inclusion for disfranchised communities through the Civil Service Commission in the days to come.

If the madhes matter is indeed a challenge to the holding of elections, then it is a question of deciding whether these distilled demands can be accepted before populist pressures force the Thakur-Yadav-Mahato trio to shift the goalposts. The demands, shorn of microphone rhetoric, can be agreed to without taking away the right of the elected constituent assembly to define the relevant terms, be it federalism or autonomy.

The assembly, after all, is where the vertical demands of individual communities of plain, hill and mountain will come up against each other, and where finally some horizontal give-and-take will begin to give shape to the new structure of the Nepali state. That is why we have to get to the elections on 10 April, as it is clear there will not be a fourth opportunity. ●

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Thai to Kathmandu



Orient Thai, a low-cost full-service airline, will now be providing flights between Kathmandu and Bangkok. The inaugural flight on 29 December took more than 100 passengers to Bangkok on its MD82 aircraft. The airline is scheduled to fly to Bangkok on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

International Yeti



Yeti Airlines has now gone international with flyyeti.com. Its new low-cost carrier will fly to destinations in Southeast Asia, India and the Middle East. It commenced operations with an inaugural flight to Kuala Lumpur on 22 January.

Image is everything



Unknown groups are trying to tarnish the image of Gorkha Lahariis Brown cigarettes by selling them in the market without their filters. The company is launching an aggressive media campaign to spread awareness among customers about this illegal activity.

NEW PRODUCTS

YARIS: Vaidya's Organisation of Industries and Trading Houses has launched a new Toyota in the small-car segment through its automotive distribution unit, United Traders Syndicate. The Toyota Yaris is a high-end hatchback and costs Rs 24,00,000.



Misplaced concern

Capital flight and market liquidity are not Nepal's worries

New Delhi: This week has been a rollercoaster ride for Indian stock markets. The Sensex that is used as the benchmark to understand the Indian market plummeted below 16,000 but recovered as soon as the US announced its interest rate cut. The Indian market has become truly



ECONOMIC SENSE
Artha Beed

globalised, meaning economic conditions and decisions made in the United States or Europe sway the fortunes of the Indian markets. While some investors are crying foul over the way the bourse has been managed, the reality of the market has finally emerged.

Eyes that were glued to the television analysis of the international markets perhaps ignored the shutdown in Nepal on Tuesday and Wednesday. We have now found that it's the streets that determine the economy, not financial fundamentals! While street leaders have found it easy to protest each fuel price rise, they have yet to help find a solution to the pricing of a product that

Nepal does not produce but must import at prices determined by international factors.

The rate cut by the Federal Reserve in the US is in anticipation of a recession. This would definitely affect liquidity in global markets, and impact on stock markets across the world. This was clear from the way Asian markets reacted this week to US economy data and the Fed rate cut. The Indian media took advantage of the visit by British Prime Minister Gordon Brown to state that India is now the second biggest investor in the UK, and the UK is the fourth biggest in India.

For Nepal, perhaps it does not matter much as we have opted out of integrating with the global economy. We are happy to bet our money on whether elections will take place or not and if they will, whether they will be in April 2008 or some other time. While self-styled intellectuals do talk about a liquidity crisis and capital flight in the Nepali context, this Beed can't see any relevance. It's like a barefoot shopper choosing between Gucci and Bally. A country that relies on

remittances for nearly a quarter of its GDP cannot be facing such a crunch. If there has been capital flight, then money that came in through informal channels went out through informal channels.

The volume of land transfer deeds that are being executed at the Land Revenue offices clearly shows there is money here. With a stock exchange that has transaction volumes on the wrong side of the decimal point, we cannot talk about a liquidity crisis. It is like a 100-house property developer calling his project a satellite city!

The more urgent issue here is one of borrowing. With commercial activities stagnating thanks to security and labour problems, falling tax revenue and increasing losses on fuel products are widening the fiscal gap.

India is planning its own price rise on fuel products in the next couple of weeks. The Communist partners in the current government are posturing to oppose it, perhaps learning from Nepal. If the hike goes ahead, it will be another nail in the Nepali fiscal coffin. ●

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Street power

Editorial in *Nepal Samacharpatra*, 24 January

After raising petrol prices for the third time in three months, the government has finally rolled back the price hike. It had to bow to the demands of the people after the valley and the entire nation protested on the streets for two consecutive days. However, the protest programs did affect a lot of people. Media staff were attacked by protesters while even the sick were made to climb down from the ambulances.

The government, parliament and the country administration decided to raise the fuel prices without considering the impact it would have on ordinary people. Although the students went into the streets to protest the inconsiderate price hike, they clearly were no more considerate when it came to humanity.

The protest was expected, but the protest organisers were incapable of controlling the infiltration. Those against the CA polls can take advantage of mass demonstrations like this and put the blame on the political parties and students. At a crucial period like this, protest organisers need to be careful about infiltration.

The almost blind and deaf government pays no heed to small and insignificant protests. It took a huge demonstration like the one we had on Wednesday to roll back the prices. It would be in the best interests of everyone if the protests could be strong enough to make the government listen but at the same time not affect the daily lives of ordinary people.



KIRAN PANDAY

Editorial in *Kantipur*, 24 January

व्यक्तिहरू

The seven parties' decision to hike the petrol prices on Monday and then roll back the prices on Wednesday shows how gullible the government is. Generally people are always against a raise in petroleum prices. The protest after the price hike should have been anticipated but the government failed to plan anything ahead of time. When organisations related to the parties in the government took to the streets, the government could not stand by its decision.

After the increase in oil prices in the international market, the government had no option but to raise prices. However, it did not do its homework before raising them. The Nepal Oil Corporation should have told the public about the international prices and its accounting losses before the price hike.

NOC is yet to provide a reason for the price hike. It has not answered questions about how much tax the government pays or why the tax can't be reduced.

Statements from NOC's chief officer claiming the prices of petrol and diesel were raised to control adulteration show how irresponsible

the corporation is. NOC needs to improve massively. It should make sure its customers get their money's worth when they buy its products.

A year ago the government decided to let private investors distribute petroleum products. They had even registered a bill, but the parliament has not been able to implement it. The government needs to tell the public why the bill has not been implemented. The roll back on petroleum prices after two days of protest shows the streets make the decisions, not the government.

Sitaula the survivor

Saroj Raj Adhikari in *Nepal*, 27 January

नेपाल



KIRAN PANDAY

Krishna Prasad Sitaula has managed to hold on to his position of home minister for the third time despite opposition from the seven parties. Even the Maoists who were known to have a soft spot for Sitaula have spoken out against him. Senior Maoist leader Baburam Bhattarai says: "The home administration is very weak."

During his two years' tenure as home minister, a record number of people lost their lives

while the tarai violence became a colossal problem. Despite the Gaur incident in March 2007 and Kapilbastu in September 2007, Sitaula is still the home minister.

When asked whether Sitaula's appointment was due to a lack of alternative candidates, Bhattarai said: "We have plenty of candidates but the NC just won't let go. Both national and international power houses have made sure that the home ministry isn't given to us." NC's Govinda Raj Joshi said: "It's not just the prime minister who wants Sitaula in the cabinet. Madhab Kumar Nepal and Puspha Kamal Dahal want him too."

Other parties have voiced their opinions about Sitaula's incompetence in maintaining law and order. The Election Commission and various diplomatic organisations have also shown concern at the worsening peace and security situation.

Although Bhattarai denied that the Maoists are holding on to Sitaula, he accepted that the Maoists were in favour of Sitaula rather than other leaders from the NC. Bhattarai asked: "Who has better vision than Sitaula in NC? Khum Bahadur, Govinda Raj?" According to him, NC's failure to move with the times is more responsible for the worsening situation than Sitaula's leadership.

Relations between the Maoists and Sitaula soured after two dozen Maoist party workers were killed in the Gaur incident and Sitaula openly put the blame for the postponement of the November election on the Maoists. The CA polls have been announced for early April and peace and security is a must if the election is to take place. The question is whether Sitaula, who has failed to create a suitable environment for the election twice before, will succeed this time.

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"Nepal is not a failed or failing state"

Indian ambassador Shiv Shankar Mukherjee is being reassigned as High Commissioner to London after four years in Nepal. During this time he witnessed king Gyanendra's rule, the emergence of the alliance between the political parties and the Maoists, the April Uprising, the comprehensive peace agreement and the interim government. As he prepares to leave, Mukherjee spoke to *Nepali Times*.

Nepali Times: Nepal has gone through a lot during your tenure. What are your feelings as you take up your new assignment?

Shiv Shankar Mukherjee: Believe me, Nepal has been easily the most challenging assignment that I have had in my 36 years of service. For me it has been a unique experience to have served here through a period when Nepal has virtually gone through a rebirth. To have a ringside view of history is a very special feeling indeed.

I know there is a long way to go even now before the Nepali people achieve their goal of peace, stability and prosperity, but one thing I am absolutely sure about is that they will get there. As the representative of India, it was my very special privilege to have been involved in providing whatever support Nepal needed from India in this period of transition. And as I prepare to leave, I know that this will continue to be our policy: to provide all the moral, political, diplomatic and material assistance to Nepal that is within our capabilities to assist Nepal's own effects.

What aspect of the political changes are you most satisfied about?

I think the most satisfactory aspect of the political changes that have taken place in Nepal is the fact that they have arisen out of a mass movement, a genuine people's movement that expressed its desire for democracy and for having a say in the way they are ruled. To any observer it was clear that this was a total and genuine expression of people power and was non-violent yet unstoppable. Another thing that is admirable about the changes that have taken place is the adherence of the political parties to constitutional norms, even in this difficult transition period.

And what were the most frustrating?

Well, I really would not characterise developments as being frustrating or otherwise and I am not simply being diplomatic (laughs). What people find frustrating is usually because of impatience, the desire to seek quick results. For instance, people talk about various delays that have taken place in the peace process because of acts of omission and commission by the political parties.

However, as someone who has



MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA

witnessed similar conflict situations on the ground in other parts of the world, let me tell you that Nepal has brought the peace where it is now in a space of less than two years, including mainstreaming an insurgency, and this is something that I have not seen or heard about in my almost four decades of service. By any yardstick, Nepal's achievement on this score is not just praiseworthy, it is amazing and I mean this most sincerely. I think those who look at this process in Nepal as full of frustration are those who will always find the glass half empty and not half full.

What advice would you give your successor about how to deal with Nepal's sensitivities about its big brother India?

What I would emphasise is that a vast majority of the population of Nepal at every level, does not wake up every morning and start thinking about his or her sensitivities about India. They want to get on with life, want improvement in the family's standard of living, better nutrition. There would be occasions, arising out of the mindset of the past, when those who have a vested interest in trying to muddy this relationship will try to do so, but I would also emphasise that their number and effectiveness is negligible and can safely be ignored most of the time.

I would equally emphasise that a stable and prosperous Nepal continues to be something that is a boon for India and that this goal is what both our countries will work for, in partnership. I would tell him about my experiences when I got out of the valley into the other Nepal, neglected in the past, and the genuine desire for cooperation

and development that I have personally witnessed in the course of laying foundation stones or inaugurating our developmental projects 100 times over.

Irritants that crop up from time to time can be dealt with very easily, not just because of the number of institutional mechanisms which have been put in place over the years, but even more so because both countries understand each other well enough to be able to sort these out amicably, with due regard for each other's interests. Frankly, as the large southern neighbour, it is India which should and can go the extra mile in these matters.

There are some who say Nepal is a failing state.

I disagree totally with this view. I have had absolutely no inhibitions in saying so loudly and clearly to a host of visitors from abroad who parachute into this country and develop some kind of instant expertise in the space of 24 hours, which they feel qualifies them to make value judgments about this country which they perhaps could not locate on a map before they got into the plane for Kathmandu.

Nepal is not a failed or failing state. Yes, it can be called a poor country in terms of its GDP and yes, it has a long way to go in terms of development. However, the fact is that it has democratic credentials that should be the envy of many of the countries of the world. It is a vibrant, resilient and open society. It has a free and courageous press and the rule of the law, however flawed.

It has a government that is dealing with the problems of transition that are facing the

country, almost for the first time in the history of its existence, with a measure of confidence. No wonder it enjoys the support of the international community in its quest for a Nepal that is at peace with itself and the world. I do not want to name names but by any criteria I would put a large number of countries below Nepal on the list of those which could be identified as failing states.

How optimistic are you about the elections being held on schedule this time?

I know that there is a lot of scepticism about the elections in April. I do not blame those who have their doubts.

Postponement of elections in June last year and again in November, for whatever reasons, was certainly disappointing to the people of Nepal, let alone the international community. It looks as though the people have gone from euphoria to realism and now inevitably, human nature being what it is, towards apathy and pessimism. But the developments in recent weeks and the agreements that have been reached by the political parties about the elections, and the fact that they are now collectively announcing their commitment to the elections, I think augurs well for the future.

No matter how much cynicism exists in some quarters, there is a realisation that this time round there will be absolutely no excuse that people will accept for not having elections. I know, as every observer in Nepal knows, that there are those who are for the status quo, but their numbers are minuscule compared with those who believe that the best way for taking the peace process forward is a reasonable free and fair election.

But there are serious obstacles to the elections.

Of course there are obstacles and it would be naïve to ignore them. First and foremost is the law and order situation, especially in the tarai. This has to be tackled not just as a law and order situation but also politically. As we all know, this is in fact being done. I am confident that the law and order and overall security situation, even if it does not become 100 percent manageable by the time elections are held, will be sufficiently under control to have reasonably free and fair elections in April this year.

The only other obstacle that I can see is those groups that stand to lose their positions and power, and perhaps the comfort of their present existence, if elections are held in a free and fair manner. This I think is an obstacle that can be overcome given that the vast majority of the people of Nepal have made their desire for elections very clear indeed.






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GEORGE MCBEAN in MANANG

In a lodge in Manang, a woman adjusts her headscarf as she laughs at the sight of her grandson feeding from his mother's breast. The curious one-year-old can't resist a quick break from his feed to see what's going on around him in the room.

Only then do I notice his grandmother has a swelling around her neck, a goitre. I am surprised—not to see it, but to realise this is the first I've seen in five days of trekking. Things have changed dramatically from when I was here 25 years ago.

Further along the trail, a crippled and dumb middle-aged man shows me a hand-written note which reads: 'My name is Raj Singh, I am physically handicapped, please help me.' I can see at once he is suffering from cretinism. He is physically and mentally impaired due to his mother's iodine deficiency at the time of his birth. He has been given this note to help him solicit donations from tourists. That is also new.

In this district in 1982, there is a strong chance that a young mother, like the one at the lodge, would have had a goitre, and her child would have been born with cretinism. Back then, while making a film about iodine deficiency for UNICEF, I took hundreds of photographs of people of all ages with goitres, some the size of footballs or large grapefruit. They were not hard to find. In one village, 80 percent of the population had goitres and 20 percent of all newborn children suffered from cretinism.

Today the term 'cretin' is considered passé, yet back in the early 1980s the medical profession had to redefine the word because of the high incidence of the illness throughout the Himalayas. At that time I followed a medical team through Manang, under the leadership of Dr Purushotam Thapa, which gave iodine oil injections to young women to provide five years of protection. The situation has now improved dramatically. Iodine Deficiency Disorders (IDD) no longer appear near the top of Nepal's list of major health problems.

Historically, iodine deficiency has been a problem in most of the world's major mountainous areas, where people lived far from the sea and so did not have access to naturally occurring iodine or sea salt in their diet. In the Alps, the Rockies and the Andes, it was common at the beginning of the 20th century to find people with goitres. In the Himalayas, the scale of the problem was not fully understood until the 1980s. Many remote communities had been devastated. Children born to mothers with iodine deficiency suffered problems ranging from mild mental and physical stunting to more severe mental deficiency, deaf mutism, dwarfism and hypothyroidism.

Just 150 micrograms of iodine per day in an adult's diet is enough to prevent these conditions, but 25 years ago few in Nepal knew this. Many blamed the water supply and responded with offerings to the gods. Children with severe cases were often tethered at home to avoid embarrassing the family.

Nepal in the 1980s lacked the infrastructure to cope with the problem. There were only 300 registered doctors, most of them in the Kathmandu valley and main towns, and there was little scope for any mass media campaign as few hill areas had radio access and fewer than 20 percent of women could read.

Initially, UNICEF worked with the government to introduce iodised salt packed into gunny sacks for distribution in the hills, but by the time the salt reached the remote mountain communities, the iodine had leached out, making it no better than local rock salt. They then launched an emergency protection program targeting three million young mothers to receive iodine oil injections.

I travelled with one of these teams and watched villagers bring out their family members—both adults and children—believing the injection would cure them. The scale of the problem was shocking. The injection could not cure those affected, and all too often we saw severely mentally impaired adults, who had spent their entire lives hidden away indoors, returned to their dark rooms by disappointed relatives.

In the late 1980s, a concerted effort was made to step up the campaign against IDD throughout what was then known as the 'Himalayan goitre belt', stretching from Pakistan to Burma. The 43rd World Health Assembly in 1990 resolved to completely eliminate these disorders. So far, only Bhutan has declared the complete eradication of IDD, but Nepal is on track to follow. The key lies in being able to supply iodised salt to more than 90 percent of the population. For remote areas like Manang, the humble plastic bag plays a vital role, keeping the salt fresh and preventing the iodine from leaching out before it reaches its destination.

Although the fight against IDD may be nearly won, there are still scores of people living in the hills who need assistance as a result of this deficiency. ●

George McBean worked with UNICEF in Nepal in the 1980s and made the film, The Golden Throat.

How plastic bag

SALT



All bag

The main reason for the dramatic decrease in goitre and cretinism in Nepal has been an aggressive government policy to provide iodised salt to the remotest regions of the country.

The big challenge here is access. Because it takes sometimes a week or more to walk to these far-flung valley

gs and a drop of iodine bred success

MOUNTAIN



gged up

in
the volatile iodine in the salt evaporates. The distribution system must also be efficient so the salt isn't stored for long periods after iodisation.

A successful 30-year combined effort by government, the private sector and aid agencies has all but wiped out visible goitre in Nepal. The percentage of Nepali households with

access to iodised salt is now 90 percentó much higher than India (50 percent) or Pakistan (17 percent). In fact, Nepal is the only country in South and Southeast Asia that has such high use of iodised salt.

Part of the reason for the success has been the fact that the government has made Salt Trading Corporation the sole dealer in this important commodity. This has ensured a uniform nationwide supply of subsidised iodised salt, ensuring quality and low prices. The subsidy has been supported by the Ministry of Health, the Indian government and UNICEF. Iodisation and packaging plants are located strategically in Birtamod, Biratnagar, Janakpur,

Bhairawa, Narayanghat and Nepalganj.

But with STC going through a management transition, the salt distribution network could be affected. Non-edible salt for industrial use is also being smuggled into Nepal from India. This has below-threshold levels of sodium chloride and is unfit for human consumption, raising the danger of goitre resurfacing.

The salt consumed in northern Nepal (ibhote nooni) is derived from Tibet's lakes but lacks iodine. STC had plans to set up iodisation plants for Tibetan salt at the Chinese border in Hilsa in Humla district, and in Dolpo.

The government spends more than Rs

150 million subsidising the annual consumption of 150,000 tons of salt every year, making it among the cheapest in South Asia. Salt in Nepal costs Rs 10 per kg compared with Rs 16 in India, Rs 17 in Pakistan, Rs 20 in Bangladesh, and Rs 23 in Sri Lanka.

Ninety percent of Nepali women are also anaemic because they don't get enough iron in their diet. With donor support, the government is now looking at double-fortification of salt with iron and iodine to address this problem in the diet of Nepali mothers.

The benevolent

According to an old Sherpa saying, a close neighbour is more useful than a distant relative. Sir Edmund Hillary, who passed away on 11 January, started off as neither, yet the bond that formed between



TRIBUTE
Lhakpa Sherpa

him and the people of the remote Himalayas could hardly have been stronger. The legacy he leaves behind is far greater than that of simply being in the first team to reach the world's highest mountain.

As a young student in Thame in 1962, I had met very few westerners, so the rangy white man in a carpenter's apron I saw hammering nails into the school rafters made a deep impression on me. He quite literally changed my life.

After opening the first school and hospital in Khumjung and Khunde, he listened to requests from other villages and returned each year to start new projects and check on the old ones. On every visit children welcomed him with songs and dances, and offered him khatas. Sir Edmund would kneel to receive garlands as villagers offered him the full

range of local brews. Hillary Sahib felt obligated to drink some of each offering, and miraculously survived the heady cocktails.

His relationship with the Sherpas in Solukhumbu was not always without tension, but his personal integrity and ability to think ahead have proved the test of time. When he wanted Khumbu declared a national park to combat the environmental impact of increased tourism, local leaders complained: 'Sir Edmund first put salt in our mouths but is now spraying chilli in our eyes.'

But years later, when I was interviewing people about the



MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA

Family, friends and the future

JEMIMA SHERPA in AUCKLAND

The image of Kami Temba Sherpa removing his traditional embroidered hat and bowing to touch his forehead to Sir Edmund Hillary's flag-draped casket was broadcast from St Mary's Church in Auckland around New Zealand and the world.

Despite the magnitude of the meticulously planned state funeral—the only uncontrollable aspect being the threatening edges of a cyclone, which settled into a gentle, accommodating drizzle—the day's events maintained the understated qualities for which Sir Ed was renowned. The service focused on the things that mattered most in his life: family, friends, his adventures and Nepal.

It is summer in Auckland, and the smooth roads, lined with people paying

Sir Ed's state funeral celebrated his life with a determination to build on his remarkable legacy

their final respects as the funeral cortège drove by, are a world away from the wintry mountain trails leading up to Sagarmatha. But in Hillary's home, where he lived with his wife, Lady June, there are touches of Nepal everywhere, from the prayer flag and khata-draped photograph of Sir Edmund in the living room to Tibetan carpets on the floors and statues, thankas, books, and photos lining walls and shelves.

Among the gathered mourners, strains of Sherpa and Nepali intermingled with accents from around the world, and the conversation was of Nepal's mountains, places and people: Everest, Ama Dablam, Kanchenjunga, Kathmandu, Khunde,

Khumjung, Thame, Tengboche.

Ang Rita Sherpa, manager of the Himalayan Trust and one of four Sherpas in the official government party from Nepal, was one of the speakers at the funeral service. In his eulogy he described Sir Ed as "a man with a big heart, our true guardian and a second father... His loss, for us, is bigger and heavier than Mount Everest." Like countless Sherpas around the world, Ang Rita's life has been shaped by the man he had come to honour, beginning with an education at Khumjung school.

There had been some confusion at the airport when two Ang Rita Sherpas passed

through security. The second is the son of the late Mingma Tsering Sherpa, Sir Ed's sirdar and best friend. This Ang Rita laughed as people told him they had seen his mother Ang Doolie Sherpa reminiscing about Hillary in an interview from Kathmandu.

Watching the daily news at the Hillary home was decidedly strange, as faces familiar from the screen later showed up in person at the house to pay their respects. New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark was among those offering their condolences.

Beyond the big names and official representatives, there were countless others

On top of the world

US, Japan, Switzerland and India, and has sold more than 20,000 copies.

Namgyal, who has reached the summit of Chomolungma three times, is donating profits from the film to the families of those who have died in accidents on the mountain. The idea for the film came to him during one of his ascents, when he witnessed a fellow climber, an American, collapse due to lack of oxygen.

He also saw some of the many bodies that still lie on the summit ridge of Chomolungma, and decided he wanted to show the rest of the world how difficult it really is to climb the mountain.

Just like the climbing, the filming was no easy feat. The 40-minute documentary, shot last year, required a team of 19 people who, in addition to climbing the mountain itself, were required to follow the climbers with heavy filming equipment. Only nine of the 19, including Namgyal himself, reached the summit during the 65 days of filming.

The documentary, which cost Rs 1.5 million, follows a team of mountaineers all the way to the top. It shows the mountains as they look from above 7,000m, offering armchair viewers breath-taking sights they would never be able to see for themselves.

The hardships 30-year-old Namgyal faced while making the film were nothing new for him. His father, from Khotang, died when he was six years old and his mother ran off with another man. He was raised by relatives and came to Kathmandu after completing tenth grade.



He worked for a while as a porter and was later offered a job at Explore Himalaya, a trekking and climbing outfit. The company, impressed by his abilities, eventually gave him the chance to climb Chomolungma, and today he is a climbing guide at the company.

"The documentary gave me a chance to show the world how we climb mountains," Namgyal says. "This is a major accomplishment in my life." ●

Santosh Baraili



Massive ice towers, torrents of water, crevasses and blistering snowstorms bar their path, but the climbers force themselves onward, scaling vertical cliffs of compacted snow and ice to reach the top of the world.

With Snow, a documentary film by climber Namgyal Sherpa, shows the ordeals faced by mountaineers in their quest to climb the world's highest peak. The film has now been screened in nearly a dozen countries, including the

mountaineer

Few have done as much for the Sherpas as Sir Edmund Hillary

national park, a carpenter said: iHad the park not been established, all the large trees would have been cut down to build lodges and it would now be hard to even find an axe handle in our forests.†

As with Sagarmatha National Park, so many other ideas of his that the Himalayan Trust has implemented over the years have produced amazing results. From building airstrips and hospitals to improving trails and bridges, he had the ability to see the larger picture.

He was also closely attuned to community needs and did not presume to have all the answers. Typically, when it became clear

that educating children only in Nepali and English was beginning to erode the Sherpa language and culture, he countered the problem by investing in monastic education and recruiting teachers of Sherpa origin from as far away as Darjeeling.

He always expected his efforts to be met with equal commitment from the local population. Students received his scholarships to study far from their home villages on the understanding that they would return home to make their own contributionsówhich saw me becoming a primary school headmaster at the age of 18.

Over the past 40 years, Sir Edmund helped me mature while I saw him age. He metamorphosed from a passionate adventurer to a compassionate, humanitarian worker. More recently, he became a respected diplomat and elder who consistently achieved more than any one else around him. Every stage of his life has been a lesson for me, including the impermanent nature of life itself.

His vitality weakened with age but his determination remained strong. His body's gradual loss of the ability to tolerate high altitude was hugely frustrating to him as it

prevented him from returning to the people and mountains he loved. Two years ago, wearing an oxygen mask and accompanied by a Sherpa doctor, he flew in a helicopter to Khumbu for the last time, to meet people and see the work he had supported for so long.

In April last year, Sir Edmund came to Kathmandu again. We talked about the future of the Himalayan Trust and all his various projects. As we chatted, we both knew it would be his last visit, so I took the day off to secure a special pass and wheeled him to the airport's VIP lounge for his flight back home to New Zealand. It was my personal

farewell to a man whose life had become so tightly interwoven with mine.

Last week's Buddhist memorial service in Boudha, with nearly 1,000 people present, was testament to the great affection he had earned from the people of Nepal. Still, it is the work that he achieved that will stay with us, and we will be forever lucky that he swapped his mountaineers' goggles for a carpenter's apron. ●

Lhakpa Norbu Sherpa has a PhD in Forestry and works for conservation and development in mountain areas.



LISA CHOEGYAL

who flocked to Auckland to pay their respects. Elizabeth Hawley, a long-time friend of Hillary's and a legend in her own right among the mountaineering fraternity,

made the long flight from Kathmandu to attend. Norbu Tenzing Norgay, son of Sir Ed's climbing partner Tenzing Norgay on the Everest ascent in 1953, was also present

and spoke at the funeral of the friendship that had blossomed between his father and the *bada sahib*. Sir Ed's son Peter was there, with other polar and mountaineering colleagues. Even the four remaining climbers and official journalist from the original 1953 expedition had gathered for a final farewell. Dr Kami Temba, the first Sherpa doctor to be put in charge of Khunde hospital, met a steady stream of former Khunde volunteer doctors and colleagues who had worked there back in the 1970s.

Despite the sadness of the occasion, there was still room for laughter and jokes. As entrepreneur Thukten Sherpa placed a khata on the casket, one close friend commented: "Now that looks more like Ed!"

Everyone had an Ed Hillary connection or story. Phurba Sherpa travelled here from Washington DC. Her late husband, conservationist Mingma Norbu, was among those who died in the Ghunsa helicopter crash in September 2006. Walking slowly behind the Hillary

family during the service, her reflections were of the man that her husband had considered a mentor and role model. While here, she worked on arrangements for a scholarship program to bring young Nepali environmentalists to Lincoln University, where Sir Edmund's earlier efforts had sent many a Sherpa—Mingma Norbu and Ang Rita among them—to receive an education that would prove instrumental in conservation efforts in Nepal.

As the conversation ebbed and flowed throughout the day among all these people who had been privileged to know Sir Ed—whether from Nepal, New Zealand, Antarctica or elsewhere—a common thread was the insistence that the most fitting way to honour him would be to ensure that the work to which he had dedicated his life should live on. ●

Jemima Sherpa was born in Khunde Hospital and is currently at university in Wellington, New Zealand.



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Dreaming of home

Jewish exiles struggle to adapt

Michale Boganim's *Odessa! Odessa!* is a documentary of transnational identity told in three chapters, elegiacally depicting the lives of Ukrainian Jews first in the Post-Soviet Ukrainian city of Odessa, then in New York City's Brighton Beach and finally in Israel's Ashdod. It is a meditation on the experience of aging, of displacement, of nostalgia and memory. With the film's bold photography, each chapter has its own visual character: Odessa awash in hues of blue, Brighton Beach lightly sepia-tinted and Ashdod brightly sun-saturated. But the film maintains a certain continuity defined by the subjects' dislocation and yearning for a home: the émigré's connection with Odessa remains palpable and alive.

Beginning in Odessa, Boganim's subjects, all clearly elderly, seem to inhabit the past just as much as the present, the accumulated weight of history and memory bearing down on their lives. One moment they debate whether the Soviet Red Army was the Messiah, a quaint but seemingly genuine pondering. The next they reminisce about personal past glories in the theatre, the story so delightful its veracity seems beside the point. Amplifying the sense of place and history is the music, providing a perfect counterpoint to the images on the screen: the mournful violin, the radio from past and present, the snatches of conversation in Russian and Yiddish.

Notably absent from their homes are younger people, and in that absence their lives have the character of abandoned children that is at once both charming and aching. They banter childishly with each other, or dress up in pearls to pose before a mirror. The camera softly backs away from its subject to bring into focus the environment they inhabit—homes that are blemished with the accumulated junk of ageing mementos. That movement, and the kind of access the subjects allow Boganim, create a kind of ghostly witness to the activity in the Odessa chapter of the film.



CRITICAL CINEMA
A Angelo DiSilva



Shifting to Brighton Beach and Ashdod, her subjects seem twice-exiled, pulled away from a deteriorating and abandoned Odessa to greener pastures in Israel and the US. But once there, they find themselves unable to either divest their identity or be accepted. In glimpses that digress from its main subjects, the film captures the ambivalence of those two immigrant-nations towards their more recent and tenaciously unassimilating citizens. The informal narrator of the Israel chapter crosses a playground bemoaning the ethnic segregation he sees, and as if to make his point, the path he takes starkly separates the Ethiopian Jewish children from the apparently European ones. And on a sand-swept boardwalk at Brighton Beach, Boganim captures a racist and xenophobic rant by beach goers and residents.

The fantasy of a glorious homeland is sustained by the immigrants' failed expectations upon arrival, and Boganim's relocated subjects often treat their condition with a bemused sanguineness. They engage in a wistful, mournful re-imagining of Odessa. Clearly, something that they bring from there is the penchant for melancholic aphorisms and storytelling. Much like the first chapter in Odessa, we are treated to darkly humorous and compelling stories.

It is only in the last chapter, with a few scenes that seem staged, that the film falters, threatening to lose its delicious and intimate subjectivity. And it is a resilient cineaste who won't feel a tad fatigued towards the end of the film. But that is easily compensated for by the richly rewarding experience this stirring and tender piece of cinema offers. ●

ODESSA! ODESSA!
Director: Michale Boganim
2005, 96 min

Candid Society is screening *Odessa! Odessa!* at Alliance Française in Tripureshwore this Sunday, 27 January at 6pm



Drama in real life

A riveting new radio series promises to spread a message of tolerance and peace

KUNDA DIXIT

Nearly two years after the ceasefire, the Nepali media has been trying, through various formats, to be a part of the national reconciliation process.

Katha Mitho Sarangiko (Story of the Sweet Sarangi) uses radio, the medium that is the most prevalent and most-underutilised in Nepal. The message of peace and justice is woven into a series of 48 drama episodes, each 11 minutes long, and will be aired on the BBC Nepali Service and more than 70 FM stations throughout Nepal from the first week of February till June.

The drama series tells the story of Dilu Gandarba, a young minstrel from Naudada near Pokhara (played by Prakash Gandarba) and Sukinder Gupta of Janakpur (played by real-life Janakpur resident, 17-year-old Ujjwal Mishra). The plot in some of the episodes revolves around the adventures of a pahadi sarangi player and a madhesi dholak drummer. It is a fusion of the two musical instruments and delivers a subtle message of the co-existence of communities in Nepal.

The script is not preachy or in-your-face, and the conversation between Sukinder and Dilu and the way they share the joy and sadness of everyday life in contemporary Nepal carries an unmistakable message.

"We never use buzzwords like 'peace' or 'inclusiveness', we avoid Sanskrit words translated from English jingoisms, the characters speak colloquial Nepali and the message is subtly weaved into the story," explains Kedar Sharma, consultant to the drama series.

The recording technique is also unique. *Katha* wasn't performed in a Kathmandu studio with actors caricaturing madhesi

accents, but used genuine voices on location throughout Nepal. In one episode, deafening horns of highway buses punctuate the background as Dilu plays his sarangi, but the two sounds resonate in perfect harmony. In another, a real-life bus conductor playing a conductor argues with Dilu about his fare and the effect is of authenticity: no script writer could have got the exact nuance of a bus conductor's colourful vocabulary or the madhesi lilt to his Nepali.

The drama also uses real-life characters like a Rukum farmer whose wife was killed in the conflict, playing himself. The part of a drug addict in Pokhara trying to extort money from his grandfather is played by a real addict.

This is a documentary radio drama (a docu-drama, literally) recorded on location with the sounds, accents, cadences and rhythms of the real Nepal. It is difficult in the age of television to get people to sit riveted to radio, but during a preview last month, that is exactly what happened to us. The subtlety of the message, simplicity of language and depth of emotions left few dry eyes in the audience.

"This sort of production hasn't been tried before in Nepal, but it has worked well in other parts of the world," says co-producer Dipak Rauniyar.



ON AIR: Actors Smiriti Mishra and Prakash Gandharba record an episode of *Katha Mitho Sarangiko* in Janakpur last month.

Radio dramatist Fiona Ledger pioneered this format and has used it for peace-building in African countries. "Written language is all too often a formalised version of the spoken word," Ledger told Nepali Times. "By producing dramas that were improvised, I wanted to bypass a tendency among playwrights to explore the dictionary rather than explore colloquial use of the spoken word."

Ledger says there is one major difference between Nepal and English-speaking countries in Africa: "Nepal has drawn on a literary inheritance that is at least 3,000 years old."

It can safely be predicted that *Katha Mitho Sarangiko* will be a big hit throughout the country in the coming months, not just entertaining audiences but carrying a strong message of peace and coexistence.

Dilu's part is played by a real-life Gandarba, Prakash, who fits right into the role. "I am just doing what my ancestors used to do, which is to go from village to village spreading the message through song, only my music will go all over the country through radio," Prakash said. ●

Katha Mitho Sarangiko
BBC World Service Trust
Produced by: Dipak Rauniyar,
Sushma Pandeya and Khagendra
Lamichhane
Editorial Consultant:
Kedar Sharma
Concept: Fiona Ledger
48 episodes will be broadcast
over 70 FM stations including
BBC Nepali Service from the first
week of February.

Holiday in Kenya's tarai

Civil strife follows the Foreign Hand around wherever he goes

Kenya's rich cultural tapestry, wonderful scenery, and astonishing wildlife had been calling us for years. Why fate dictated we'd arrive just before a stolen election plunged the country into chaos is another matter altogether.

MOVING TARGET Foreign Hand

Perhaps I'm drawn to such crises after so many years of bad politics in Nepal. Holidaying in a country sans political turmoil might be like going cold-turkey. Worse still, there's reason to suspect civil strife follows the Hand around, as riots erupt with disturbing frequency wherever he goes. If word of this got out I could be banned from entire continents.

Arriving in Nairobi ten days before the event initially seemed lucky. With Christmas, elections on 27 December and the New Year in the air the mood was festive and upbeat. Political rallies looked like celebrations and while touring the central highlands, a landscape so lovely as to insure optimism, any chance of violence seemed very remote indeed. Kenyans are a mature, engaging people, sophisticated in their social dealings and proud of their country's diversity and stability. Many went to great lengths in explaining that no matter which side won, violence was a thing of the past.

Such charming if ultimately misguided idealism reminded me of Nepal in the early 1990s, when folks still trusted their leaders. Later on, as the election went terribly wrong, Kenya looked ever more familiar.

Kibaki Thani, the incumbent, won the country's first free vote five years ago, unseating the classic African Big Man, Daniel arap Moi, who had clung to power for 24 years. Kibaki's achievements include a booming economy, better roads, greatly improved security (the capital is no longer referred to as Nairobberry) and free primary education. Meanwhile, rampant cronyism favoring his fellow Kikuyu, increased taxation, and skyrocketing commodity prices had badly tarnished his image. Pre-election polls indicated a dead heat with the opposition



leader, Raila Odinga, a member of the Luo tribe from western Kenya. His promise of a more inclusive polity had caught the imagination of many who resent the Kikuyus' political and economic domination.

A nagging sense of déjà vu took hold as we arrived in the port city of Mombasa on Election Day. The coastal areas are infused with strong Omani Arab and Indian cultural influences, adhere to Islam, and despite bringing in much of the country's revenue, are far removed from political power concentrated in the Christian highlands. We soon fell in with some highly motivated citizens who frequent the hotel bar (these are African Muslims, after all), and their tales of unbridled nepotism and corruption in the Kibaki cabinet had me feeling right at home. Strident demands for equality between Kenya's 42 tribes sounded eerily familiar, and after a few cold Tuskers it was obvious Coast Province is the local tarai, with a long list of grievances against highland domination.

Initial results showed a lead of almost 1 million votes for Raila Odinga and our friends began celebrating imminent victory. Meanwhile, everything was on

hold as tallies from districts north of Nairobi, a Kibaki stronghold, were suspiciously delayed for three long days.

Skills gained on the ground in Nepal served me well. Anticipating civil strife, finding a quiet place to ride out the storm, and staying one step ahead of disaster are second nature by now. Above all else, appreciating the

kindness of strangers and taking their advice is a key part of the Moving Target Strategy. As markets shut down and tensions rose, our drinking buddies insisted we flee before all hell broke loose.

They agreed our next destination, remote Lamu Island, was far enough removed from everywhere to be safe but fiercely

opposed our plan to go by road. Late-night calls to their friend, the pilot, ensured we got seats on the tiny prop plane leaving the next day. One of our mates drove us through deserted streets to the airport (Kenya Bandh?) and sure enough, Mombasa blew up within hours of our departure.

Mellow Lamu was the right place to be as Nairobi's slums burned, highways shut down and riots engulfed the country. In Africa it's called tribalism, in South Asia casteism, two names for the same grim reaper of ethnic violence that hangs over both regions. Innocent Kikuyus living outside the highlands were the first victims of the backlash against their president's deceit.

When it became obvious the election was being scammed the dismay reminded me poignantly of similar betrayals endured by Nepalis. Highlanders who arrogantly believe in their god-given right to rule is an all too familiar theme around here, and once again an elite, short-sighted and contemptuous of their subjects, was willing to gamble it all to retain power.

This election was supposed to bolster Kenya's role as a beacon of stability in a troubled region. Instead the country has suddenly joined the likes of Nepal teetering on the edge of calamity. God knows we all deserve better. ●

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ABOUT TOWN

EXHIBITIONS

- ❖ **Acrylic paintings** by Asha Dongole at the Park Gallery, Lazimpat, until 30 January, 10AM-6PM. 4419353
- ❖ **Tibetan Lhosar photographs** by Daniel Collins at the Saturday CafÉ, Boudhanath stupa, 6 February-31 March.

EVENTS

- ❖ **Nepali Hindu rituals** a presentation by Mona Pokhrel Adhikari, a CSGN event, 30 January, 5.30 PM at the Shanker Hotel
- ❖ **Rangavad in Nepali literature** Shastrartha with Govind Raj Bhattarai, 3-5PM, 26 January at Martin Chautari. 6910277
- ❖ **Buddha Rediscovered** a talk on the roots of Buddhism by historian Charles Allen, 29 January, 5.30 PM at Baithak, Babar Mahal Revisited.
- ❖ **Media Discussion Series** on the market of documentaries with Bupendra Basnet and Suchitra Shrestha, 31 January, 3PM at Martin Chautari. 4238050
- ❖ **Youth Discussion Series** on water, energy and our strategy, 3PM, 1 February at Martin Chautari. 4238050
- ❖ **The Kathmandu Chorale** rehearsals for the Spring season, 4 February, 7PM, at The British School, Sanepa. All singers welcome.

MUSIC

- ❖ **Paleti** with Prem Dhoj Pradhan, 25 January, at the nepa-laya ěri sala, Kalikasthan, 5.30 PM. 4412469
- ❖ **Ciney Gurung** every Wednesday and Rashmi Singh every Friday, live at the Absolute Bar, Hotel Narayani Complex, 7PM. 5521408
- ❖ **Catch 22** live at the Zest Restaurant and Bar, Pulchok.

DINING

- ❖ **Smokey Mountain High** midday BBQ lunch at Dwarika's Himalayan Shangri-la Village Resort, Dhulikhel, 26 January, Rs 700 including a bottle of beer.
- ❖ **Illy espresso coffee** at the Galleria cafe, Thamel with contemporary Art exhibition at the Galleria lounge, every Friday espresso coffee cocktails, also at Park Village, Buddhanilkantha.†
- ❖ **International four course buffet** at the Sunrise CafÉ with a range of Borisi signature dishes at The Chimney, Hotel Yak and Yeti. 4248999
- ❖ **Wine and Cheese** every Friday and Saturday at the Rox Bar, Hyatt Regency, 5-8PM. 4491234
- ❖ **Jazz in Patan** with coffee, food, drinks and dessert at the New Orleans Cafe, Jawalakhel. 11.30 AM-10PM.5522708
- ❖ **Saturday special barbeque**, sekuwa, momos, dal-bhat at The Tea House Inn, Windy Hills, Nagarkot every Saturday. 9841250848.
- ❖ **Dice-licious brunch** at Kakori, Soaltee Crowne Plaza, roll the dice to the number of the day and get 50% discount on an individual meal, Saturdays and Sundays, 12.30-3.30PM. 4273999
- ❖ **Scrumptious wood fired pizzas**, cocktails and specialty coffees at Roadhouse, Bhatbateni 4426587, Pulchok 5521755 and Thamel 4260187.
- ❖ **Cocktails and jazz** with the JCS Quartet and a choice of cocktails at Fusion n the Bar at Dwarika's. 4479448
- ❖ **Starry night barbeque** at Hotel Shangri-la with Ciney Gurung, Rs. 666.00 nett. per person, at the Shambala Garden, every Friday 6.30 PM onwards. 4412999
- ❖ **Kebabs and curries** at the Dhaba, Thapathali. 9841290619
- ❖ **Calcutta's rolls, biryani, kebabs** Indian cuisine at Bawarchi, Bluebird Mall Food Court. 9741000735
- ❖ **LaVAzza coffee** Italy's favourite coffee at La Dolce Vita,†Thamel. 4700612
- ❖ **Little Britain coffee shop** fresh organic coffee, homemade cakes, WiFi internet, open all day, everyday. 4496207
- ❖ **Pizza** from the woodfired oven at Java, Thamel. 4422519



GETAWAYS

- ❖ **Fulbari Resort and Spa, Pokhara** Rs 10,999 for Nepali double, \$219 for expat double, two days and three nights package, with transportation from the airport, drinks, tennis and swimming, discounts on food and beverages.
- ❖ **Weekend getaways at Le Meridien, Kathmandu**, Resident Night Rs 4,999 and two nights package Rs 9,998. Also includes breakfast, lunch, dinner, spa facilities, swimming pool, steam sauna, Jacuzzi and gym facilities.

For inclusion in the listing send information to editors(at)nepalitimes.com

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WEEKEND WEATHER

by NGAMINDRA DAHAL

If you are wondering why the dark sky in the middle of this week did not produce rain, it is because the clouds were riding the high-altitude jetstream from Africa. Some snow did fall at higher altitudes but in Kathmandu it just became bitterly cold, despite the tyre burning. The satellite picture for Thursday afternoon indicates that we will see a gap in the cloud cover over the weekend before overcast skies return early next week. We had 5 mm of rain last Saturday but there is still a seasonal shortfall of 50 mm. Expect misty mornings in the Kathmandu valley, with sunny but frosty mornings in the surrounding hills.



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Nabil goes rural



When Nabil Bank opened in 1984, it was the first foreign joint venture in Nepal's banking sector and enjoyed first player advantage. But it didn't last. Soon, there were other multinationals: Grindlays and Indosuez overtook Nabil.

Nabil had transformed the way banking was done, providing a breath of fresh air for those used to the shoddy and indifferent service at the public sector banks. But by the 1990s there were others who offered the same service.

Nabil didn't exactly go into decline, but it seemed to have lost direction. That was when the board decided to make some course corrections and one part of that effort was to induct management talent from India. Then, three years ago, it brought in Anil Shah, the man who pioneered consumer banking at Standard Chartered. It turned out to be the right decision at the right time.



MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA

CRISPLY PUT: Nabil's CEO Anil Shah has given his bank a role that goes beyond banking to spur economic growth in the hinterland.

Shah has gone about systematically re-inventing the Nabil brand, overhauling everything from the mission statement to giving the bank a new strategic direction in rural banking.

"We didn't want to be an also-ran," Shah said in an interview this week after Nabil was selected as the Nepali Times Company of the Month for January. "We brainstormed about what we wanted to be and everyone agreed we had to be Nepal's bank of first choice."

Indeed, 'Nepal's Bank of 1st Choice' has now become Nabil's slogan and was the product of an exercise to draft a new mission statement that involved the

entire staff.

"Everyone participated in the process, so it is a vision that we all own. Our mission statement is not a destination, it is a journey," says Shah listing the bank's stakeholders: customers, shareholders, regulators, the community and staffers.

Besides being profitable and efficient, Nabil wants to be a model for transparency among Nepali banks and has tried to go beyond tokenism in its corporate social responsibility credo by sponsoring female literacy programs and a glaucoma initiative at Tilganga Hospital. Staffers, who call themselves 'Nabilians', say there is a greater sense of team spirit in company in the past three years

It's not just profits that is driving Nepal's first joint venture bank to venture out to the villages

and there is a realization that their company has a goal beyond day-to-day banking to contribute to the nation's economy and to serve the community.

Some of Shah's acronyms seem to come straight out of the formula of management gurus. For example, for staffers he has simplified corporate goals into CRISP where C is for 'corporate focussed', R is for 'result oriented', I is for 'innovations', S for 'synergy' and P for 'professional'. The team-building is showing dramatic results in the bottom line. Nabil shares have soared from Rs 815 in 2005 to Rs 4400 today. Net profits are up by 48 percent.

Nabil's management has tried to find the middle ground between the efficiency of a multinational joint venture and a Nepali bank. This hybrid formula, they hope, will position

the bank to adjust to the post-2010 era from when foreign banks will be allowed in without restrictions according to a WTO membership timetable. Nabil has taken a strategic decision to target rural customers. Among the reasons is a crowded urban market, the injection of remittance money into the countryside, and the fact that the default rate is virtually zero in the districts.

Two months ago, the bank launched the first phase of its rural banking drive by opening a dozen new semi-urban branches in the districts. By next year, Nabil will have 30 branches in even more remote areas. "Of Nepal's 27 million people 20 million live in rural areas, you can't be a national bank by ignoring that," says Shah, who admits he got the inspiration from Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal who was asked by journalists after joining the peace process if he'd ever go back to the jungle. "We were never in the jungle, we were in the real Nepal," Dahal had said.

Shah says it is not enough in a country like Nepal for banks to be profitable and pay taxes. "There is a higher calling, we have to ask ourselves, are we helping make a difference. And the way we do that is by taking financial services to rural areas and make that a catalyst for economic growth and employment generation," says Shah. "In 1984, Nabil brought international banking to Kathmandu. In 2007 we took banking to rural Nepal." ●

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Varun launches Dhapasi luxury apartments



SAM KANG LI

Park View Horizon was recently launched by Varun Developers, a subsidiary of RJ Corp. This is a group whose portfolio includes Pepsi Bottling, retail, fast food, health care and real estate development. Situated at Dhapasi Heights, Park View offers 185 super-luxurious condominiums. *Nepali Times* spoke to Ravi Jaipuria of RJ Corp (above) in Kathmandu this week.

***Nepali Times:* In Nepal, you are known primarily as Pepsi bottlers. Isn't selling real estate a different line of business altogether?**

Ravi Jaipuria: Yes, we've been doing business in Nepal for the last 10 years as a bottler for Pepsi. Our presence here has made us familiar in and with this country. We have experienced the ups and the downs in the market here. Our portfolio in India, Sri Lanka and other countries includes businesses in real estate in addition to those of fast food, health care and education. Combining our Nepal-based business and real estate management experiences, we decided to get into building apartments in Kathmandu. We are confident that the market for apartments is growing here.

In recent years, we've seen a rise in the number of housing companies in Nepal. How are you different?

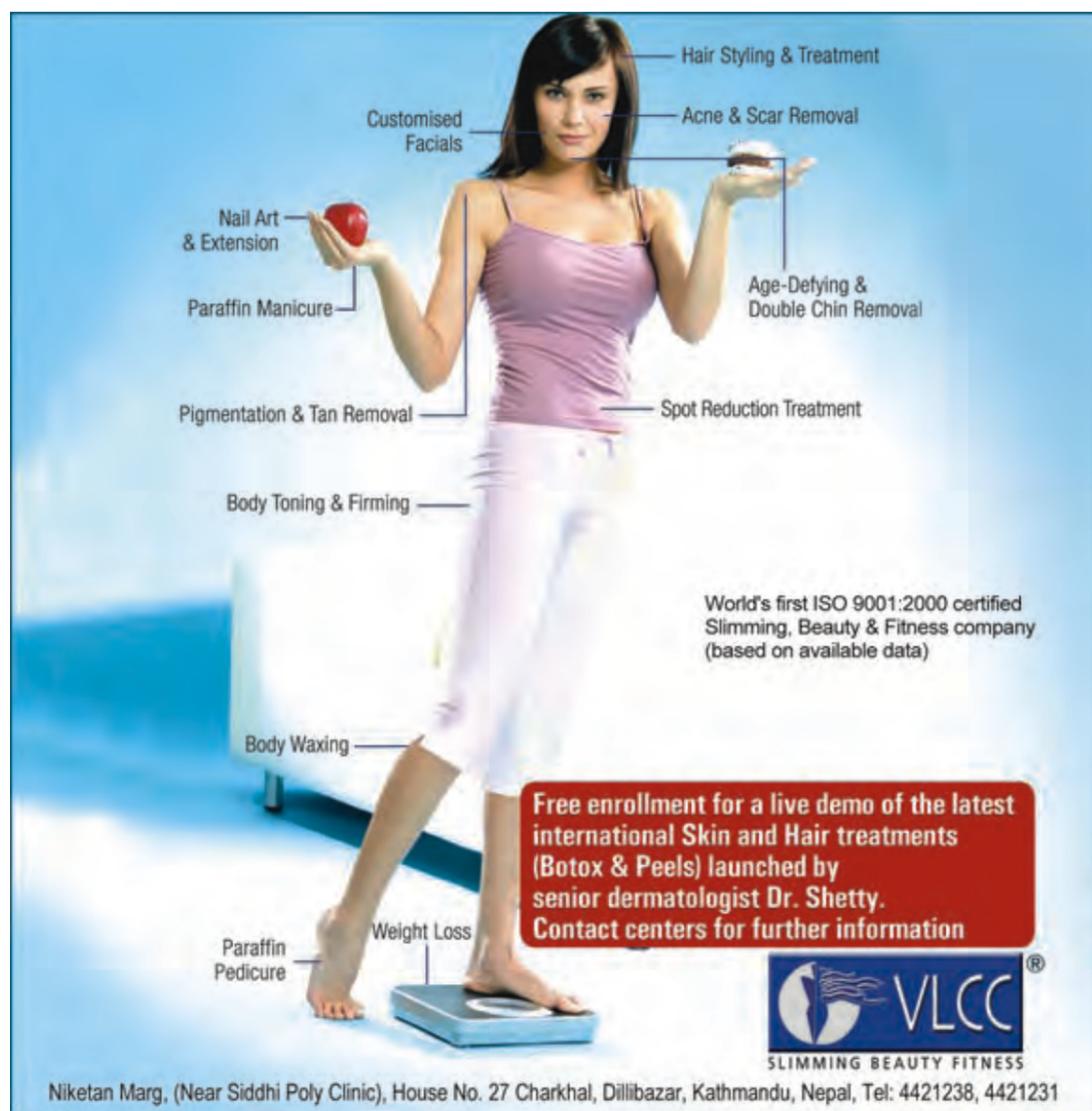
We offer four things that our competitors cannot match: quality, size, location and design. We offer central heating and air-conditioning in all our buildings. Our buildings are high-rises that go up to 15 storeys. At Park View Horizon, we offer 200 apartments. Our location is at Dhapasi Heights, which is not far from the city, yet outside of it. You can see the Himalayas from the top floors. It was designed by the architects who designed the India Habitat Centre in New Delhi.

Some people may object to Kathmandu becoming a place for high-rise residential buildings. How do you respond to their concerns?

We understand their concerns. We are proud to say that we are the first developers permitted by the government's Ministry of Environment. Before starting work, we did an environmental impact assessment for about six months. What we have designed today is an eco-friendly community resident centre.

One criticism of developers is that they buy chunks of land to build secluded housing colonies for rich people. In the process, they neglect local communities.

In our case, we have not neglected the local Dhapasi communities. We have built a community centre for nearby residents. We have put in road networks to the surrounding villages. We have hired local workers in our project, and our contractor is the Nepal-based Chitawan Koie. At every step of our project, we have thought and planned like local residents. We offer world-class amenities, 70 percent open landscape and the best global themes in home décor that will target high-end premium clientele. We expect the project to be a success and in the near future more such ventures will come up.



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KIRAN PANDAY

CHILD RELIEF: (l-r) Kan Tun (WHO), Yasho Vardhan Pradhan (Child Health Division), Gillian Mellsop and Prabhat Bangdel (UNICEF), Anne Penniston (USAID) and Ian Pett (UNICEF ROSA) released a report on the state of Nepal's children at Hotel Himalaya on Thursday.



MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA

ENDLESS DEMANDS: Maoist Trade Union members at Surya Nepal strike on Wednesday for a 100 percent bonus and a provident fund, among 15 new demands.



SAM KANG LI

STRONG BELIEF: The faithful carry the statue of Rato Machhendranath (God of Rain) from Bungamati to Patan during a festival on Saturday.



KIRAN PANDAY

STAGE FRIGHT: Actors perform a play based on Sanjiv Upreti's novel iGhanachakkari at the Gurukul Sama Theatre on Tuesday.

Chinese Kathmandu Revolving
North Indian Bawarchi
Sandwiches Sandwich Point
Healthy Food Weight Watchers
Continental Hungry Sam
Tirakali Tukche
Tibetan Noodle Bar Te
Newari Yomari
Snacks Snack Bar
Pizza & Pasta Cucina Italia
Beverages Watering Hole
Lebanese food Kabsa Beiruty
Fresh Fruits, Juices & Salads Fruit Salad Club

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